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## AN END TO "CHILDHOOD AMNESIA": THE UTOPIAN IDEAL OF CHILDHOOD IN CRITICAL THEORY

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*The examination focuses on how critical theory has viewed childhood and employed the image and meaning of childhood in ideological elaboration. It explores how critical theorists such as Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Bloch, and Marcuse contrasted the riches of childhood experience with the poverty of mature adult perception and with the notion of societal progress. By uniting lost experiential dimensions of childhood and restoring childhood memory, critical theory anticipates a release of emancipatory reflection and transformed social praxis.*

Among the currents of scholarly inquiry there has been growing interest in the study of childhood. Childhood has recently attracted a great deal of attention. Studies directed at childhood (Aries 1962; Zelizer 1985; Kuhn 1982) have investigated the historical development of childhood, the treatment of childhood in the past, the social value of childhood, and the literary treatment of childhood. It is an interesting historical paradox, that childhood once unknown, has now become the most analyzed phase in the developmental cycle of humans. The significance of childhood in literature, history, and sociology indicates that it is an archetypal theme embedded in social history.

Most historians agree that modernization has increased adults' concern for children's well being (de Mause 1974; Shorter 1977). In particular the nineteenth century saw important changes in Western attitudes toward children. There was a "surge of sentiment" (Shorter 1977), and a "sacralization" of childhood (Zelizer 1985). People became more likely to view children as priceless, lovable, vulnerable innocents to be cherished for their own sakes. The purpose of this essay is to examine this new understanding of childhood as it figures in critical theory.<sup>1</sup>

Students of critical theory have examined its history (Jay 1973) and its main theoretical and empirical concerns (Buck-Morss 1977; Held 1980). However, conspicuously absent from studies of critical theory is an examination of the image, meaning, and status of childhood. The question inevitably arises, how is childhood treated in critical theory? This essay explores how many critical theorists have contrasted the riches of childhood experience with the poverty of mature adult perception and with societal progress.<sup>2</sup>

# THE STATUS OF CHILDHOOD IN CRITICAL THEORY

One of the greatest costs of progress, critical theorists note, is the repression of memory—particularly childhood memory. "All reification," Theodore Adorno (qtd. in Schroyer 1973: 199) observed, "is forgetting: objects become thing-like at the moment when they are grasped without being fully present in all their parts, where something of them is forgotten." As advanced industrial society developed the individual was more integrated into and dependent upon the collectivity and less capable of active self expression. Adorno is profoundly fascinated by the memory of past experience, particularly its irresistible lure into the past with its promise of happiness and pleasure, and its threat to the kind of activity, planning and rational thought encouraged by modern western civilization. For Adorno the antagonism between society and memory was resolved by renouncing society. The totality and wholeness that technological societies denied, Adorno insinuated, existed and could be sought in childhood, since children had not yet sensed the irreversible and ineluctable impoverishment which led to adulthood and modern civilization.

The hidden and utopian quality of lost childhood memories, their separation from the rest of life, their inaccessibility, and their incompatibility with conventional, purposeful, daily, activity, are described lucidly by Walter Benjamin (1976). Benjamin, himself a collector of children's books, appreciated the richness of experience to the child. Benjamin's writing on childhood attempted to capture those moments of wonder, encapsulated in the simple gesture or the single action of a very young child. Benjamin believed that the child's grasp of his environment and the world around him went far beyond any discovery made in adult life. "For children," Benjamin wrote:

can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures; the application of decals—the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names (1973: 102).

To Benjamin, no Columbus, no Marco Polo had ever seen stranger and more fascinating and thoroughly absorbing sights than the child who learned taste, smell, touch, sight and to use their body, their senses, and their mind. Benjamin idealized the child's capacity for unrepressed emotional and imaginative experience. In childhood, he found the self to be not only vigorous, but whole. Benjamin saw children as the incarnation of a miracle that awoke the sense of the marvelous not only in themselves, but in those who encountered them.

Benjamin contrasts the riches of childhood experience, the child's great capacity for impressions and experience with adult experience. In adult experience formal continuity in time is offset by barrenness in content, by an incapacity to reproduce anything that resembles a really rich, full, rounded and

alive experience. In contrast childhood was the period of human life which was richest in experience. Everything is new to the child. The child's grasp of the world and the environment are discoveries which in experiential scope and quality, go far beyond any discoveries that are made in adult life. There are relatively few adults who are fortunate enough to have retained something of the child's curiosity, capacity for questioning, and for wonder. In Benjamin, the utopian impulse leads towards an apotheosis of simplicity and a fascination with the enchanted, the uncanny, and the inexplicable. He found these qualities in childhood and the fairy tales of childhood. He took fairy tales so literally that he suggested that they made real fulfillment possible—particularly to children.

The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits...The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is when he is happy, but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy (1976: 102).

Benjamin was drawn to the sense of enchantment; the engagement with the "liberating magic" that the child experiences in the fairy tale. He depicted the child's sense of knowing and understanding as transformative. It is these perceptions of the child he felt which invests everyday experience with consciousness and meaning.

As early as 1941 Max Horkheimer expressed a serious concern with the disappearance of childhood and a commitment to the redemptive qualities of childhood. Just as the presence of the child could be a cause for joy, he felt, so its loss could be a tragedy. "Development has ceased to exist," Horkheimer wrote:

The child is grown up as soon as he can walk. During the heyday of the family the father represented the authority of society to the child, and puberty was the inevitable conflict between the two. Today, however, the child stands face to face with society at once, and the conflict is decided even before it arises (1941: 381).

Horkheimer regarded this as unfortunate. The separation that the adult world imposed between reality and play, and the demarcation of these activities into specific contexts was not part of the normal structure of childhood. He believed children did not view the world like that—at least not until they were taught to do so. Education and learning, while on the one hand furthering the process of discovery, on the other hand gradually broke it and finally stopped it completely. In striking phrase hesitates, "The child, not the father, stands for reality (Horkheimer 1941:381)." He viewed the child's essence as organic and natural requiring that it not be suffocated by civilization's diseased outpourings in order to flower. He suggests that the presumable riches of childhood, the

innocence, the child's great capacity for impressions and experience are corrupted as the child is transformed into a grown-up, useful member of society. In the technological era, a space where children could be at home in the world, where they could be the subject and not only the object of history, no longer existed.

In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer searched for a liberated future through regaining the "mimetic impulse of the child." Imitation, Horkheimer argued, was one of the primary means of learning in early the childhood. The whole body was an organ of mimetic expression in which such manners as laughing, crying and speaking were acquired. Eventually, however, civilization transcended the mimetic impulse in favor of rational, goal directed behavior:

Conscious adaptation, eventually, domination replace the various forms of mimesis. The progress of science is the theoretical manifestation of this change: the formula supplants the image, the calculating machine the ritual dance (Horkheimer 1977:115).

The schemata of adult memory and social epistemology were not suitable receptacles for early childhood experiences and were therefore not fit to preserve these experiences and enable their recall. The tremendous amount of experience and the quality of the experience which the child underwent did not find a proportionate variety of suitable vessels for its preservation in modern civilization.

Horkheimer, however, implied that mimesis need not be repressed; it could imitate life-affirming characteristics such as the sense of justice of the father and the instinctual love of the mother that were superseded by later civilization. The imitative impulse, Horkheimer argued, could be restored through language:

Language reflects the longings of the oppressed and the plight of nature; it releases the mimetic impulse. The transformation of this impulse into the universal medium of language rather than into destructive action means that potentially nihilistic energies work for reconciliation...Philosophy helps man to ally his fears by helping language fulfill its genuine mimetic function, its mission of mirroring the natural tendencies. Philosophy is at one with art in reflecting passion through language and thus transferring it to the sphere of experience and memory (1977: 115).

Ontogenetically, Horkheimer maintained that this condition is present in the young child, it is only later tragically overcome by civilization and maturity. The quality of early childhood experience did not fit into the schemata of experience fashioned by adult culture with its biases, emphases, and taboos.

For Horkheimer the child lived in open communication with the world, and the world in turn invited exploration from the child. Speech for children was not only an instrument of communication, but the very essence of their jubilant nature. Things in the world challenged the child, disclosed themselves to the

child. Language comprised the mode through which the child realized himself or herself. It was through language that the child restructured, invented, and transformed their given reality, for the transforming nature of language allowed the child to become fully realized as a human being. It was vital, Horkheimer felt, that the child be permitted to live this life-phase fully, to play and let things disclose themselves. In this light Habermas's notion of the ideal speech situation is an elaboration of Horkheimer's notion of childhood.

For Horkheimer language was the child's praxis on the adult world—and humanity's hope for an alternative to the deterministic laws of technological society. That is, language could make available and comprehensible the discrepancy between unschematized experience and the categories of civilized conventional experience. As long as adults can recover through the intellect, the imagination or the involuntary memory, the mental set of the child, and appropriate for themselves the schemata within which the child orders the elements of its experiences, then they could relieve the profound reality of humanity's condition, and could even retranslate it into terms comprehensible to other adults.

This apotheosis of childhood is stated in compelling form by Ernst Bloch. A student of utopian thought, Bloch argued that history was not subject to deterministic laws that left no place for humans and their dreaming. Bloch's vision of history culminated in nostalgia for the "homeland" seen in childhood, but lost to adulthood:

The root of history is working, creating man, man who transforms and outstrips the conditions of his existence. Let him achieve self-comprehension and ground his life in real democracy, without renunciation and estrangement; then something will arise in the world that all men see in childhood, a place where no one has yet lived; homeland (qtd in Wagner 1972: 333).

In the return to the lost world of childhood the love and security sacrificed by the catastrophe of growing up are recaptured. The more acute the suffering of the time of separation, the more keen the joy of returning home again.

Herbert Marcuse also attempted to redefine the social status of the child, transforming Original Sin into Original Innocence. Western society, Marcuse argued, has developed a concept of childhood which contains the dominant features of what he termed "the performance principle." However, Marcuse contended that childhood, along with art and phantasy contained the negation of the "the performance principle." Childlike fantasy, he argued, retains the structure and tendencies of the psyche prior to organization by reality. Thus, childhood linked the deepest layers of the unconscious with the products of consciousness; preserving the archetypes of liberation, the tabooed images of freedom. Childhood preserved the meaning of the subhistorical past; images of liberation are kept alive in literature, art, and in the imagination of children. Thus, "historical possibility," Marcuse held is present in "childish fantasy." (Marcuse 1962: 145)

To Marcuse, freedom from social conventions and utilitarian calculation made the child an emblem of a fuller, more sensuous and imaginative life and a focal point for a potentially sharp critique of modern society. In Marcuse's work, childhood remembrance becomes a decisive weapon in the struggle against domination. Domination is made possible, he suggests, because the "ability to forget" sustains submissiveness and renunciation. Such forgetfulness reproduces the conditions that produce injustice and enslavement. "Against this surrender to time," he continued, "the restoration of remembrance to its rights, as a vehicle of liberation, is one of the noblest tasks of thought." (Marcuse 1962: 212) Childhood represents remembrance, and is viewed as a vehicle for the liberation from the restraints of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

R.H. Tawney observed that there is no touchstone which reveals the true character of a social theory more clearly than "its treatment of children." (Tawney 1926:268) Tawney expresses the idea that became more or less inevitable with the emergence of the modern consciousness of childhood; that childhood was not only socially important, but ideologically significant; that the way in which a social theory represents or does not represent childhood is worthy of scrutiny. Childhood is ideologically significant in critical theory. Critical theorists use childhood as a symbol of liberation and envision childhood as a means of change in elaborating their ideological position. On the one hand, an exaltation of childhood points to a critique of technological society. Childhood presents a new reality with an order of its own. In critical theory children are considered incomplete beings who in their very lack of completion, possess gifts that are lost in the finished product and in modern civilization. Childhood also provides a mechanism for an imaginary escape from technological society and an ideal for social transformation. Critical theorists have found that the child's very autonomy gives it a transformative power which influences not only the image we have of children, but also the image of the future.

As a critique of modern society critical theory from Adorno to Habermas attempts to promote conscious emancipatory consciousness and activity. Critical theory therefore attempts to restore missing parts of the historical process to humanity (Schroyer: 31) and to enable people to "see through socially unnecessary authority and control systems." They urge an end to what Ernest Schachtel (1959) has called "childhood Amnesia," the forgetting, repressing, and devaluing of childhood experience. By uniting lost experiential dimensions of childhood and restoring childhood memory critical theory anticipates a release of emancipatory reflection and transformed social praxis.

Critical theory posits an antagonism between society and the status of childhood and the memory of childhood. Critical theorists argue that the culturally and socially influenced process of memory organization results in a repression of childhood memories and perceptions. The world of modern civilization has no place for this type of experience. It cannot permit itself to

have any use for it, it cannot permit the memory of it, because such memory or retrieval of its features would explode the order of civilization.

Childhood provides Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Marcuse and other critical theorists with both a haunting vocabulary of loss that could be exploited for social criticism of adulthood and modern industrial society, and for elaborating the features of an idyllic utopian existence. Critical theorists express a nostalgia for lost innocence—an attraction to characteristics of childhood in an increasingly corrupt and technological world. The innocent child is a vision of psychic wholeness in a world where selfhood has become problematic and sincerity obsolete. Childhood, because it is untainted by social artifice, embodies the moral innocence and emotional spontaneity which appears to be absent in modern society. A common strand of criticism of modern society is especially clear in the numerous references to the ideal and utopian features of childhood. These authors juxtapose a child's sincerity with adult artifice, the child's spontaneous feeling and intense experience with the utilitarian calculation of adults.

The writers described in these pages find a utopian condition not in the historical past or the historical future, and not in a particular place or in a pastoral or technological condition. They find utopia in a special point of human development—childhood. They encourage the reception and reproduction of the experiences of childhood as a utopian model of existence. They find childhood to embody such simplicity, innocence, and virtue that they equate childhood with a utopian paradise. They suggest that social transformation rests on the ability of adults to recover, through the intellect and the imagination the mental set of the child and the schemata within which the child orders the elements of its experience. In childhood, they hold, people can step beyond existing arrangements and perceptions of history and freely create an alternative history and reality which projects what "can be." They see childhood as an organizing experience, which is free from both external and internal compulsions, is non-instrumental, and transcends the static idea of being and history. They express a longing for lost innocence—the possibility of continuing to be childlike and pure in an increasingly corrupt and dominated world. The key to bliss is not science and learning, or any transcendence that humanity can store up in itself, but a childlike state of innocence. They hold that modern society can only achieve happiness by finding the garden of childhood once more.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 The job of constructing this perspective involves piecing together casual references, tacit assumptions and common themes from the voluminous literature of critical theory.

- 2 These perceptions are of course not new. At the beginning of the industrial revolution some authors looked for utopia not in social foundation, but in a stage of human development— childhood. The Romantics saw childhood as the "kingdom of heaven", a secular utopia centered around the nature of innocent and good beings. Recoiling from what they saw as the overcivilized state of modern existence, they exalted the authentic experience of childhood as an end in itself. They embraced childhood as an exemplification of an alternative to the sterility of positivism and technology, urging that society affirm and accept childhood with all its potentialities.

A cult of childhood developed in opposition to the features of industrialization, which saw the child as the embodiment of purity and innocence. In the works of Wordsworth, Blake, and Rousseau, children came to be idealized for their special attributes; imagination, unselfconsciousness, and a closeness to nature. There was a sense that modern life had grown dry, passionless, and hard, and that the regeneration of childhood was necessary. The Romantic movement captured its sense of historical dislocation in the apotheosis of innocence and childhood.

- 3 As commentators (Held 1980 14; Buck-Morss 1977) have noted, critical theory was a key element in the formation and self understanding of the New Left and the counter culture. The recovery of childhood is a prominent theme in the New Left and countercultural critique of modern technological life in the late 1950's and 1960's. The distinction between "straight" and "hip" often divided generations. The notion was perhaps best epitomized in the Yippie slogan not to trust anyone over thirty. The association between the innocence of childhood and the romantic idea of childhood wisdom was explained by the fact that children had not yet had the opportunity to learn the terms by which an adult perspective is defined. One of the Movement's dominant themes entailed a devaluation of adulthood as a bad bargain with life in which one gave up more than one got. "I am never quite free of the forces attempting to make me grow up, sign contracts, get an agent, be a man." Raymond Mungo observed (1970 136-137) in his memoirs of the counterculture. "I have seen what happens to men. It is curious how helpless, pathetic, and cowardly is what adults call a Real Man...If that is what is manhood, no thank you." Many of the figures of the counterculture in the sixties discovered in the child the harbinger and the shape of a cultural revolution. Norman O. Brown urges (1972 60) humanity "to regain the lost laughter of infancy." In *Slaughter House Five*, subtitled "The Children's Crusade," Kurt Vonnegut's hero Billy Pilgrim is a childlike figure who invents himself and his universe as a way of coping with the harsh reality of World War II. Norman Mailer found the saving quality of the hipster-psychopath's behavior in the retreat to childhood. Mailer noted that when the psychopath acted out his infantile fantasies, he was trying to go back to the early days

of his life, which had determined his character and course ever since, and remake the decisions that led inexorably to the present. In his (1959 320) attempt "to try to live the infantile fantasy" the hipster-psychopath tries to reconnect with his childhood rather than trying to repress it. Theodore Roszak, who tried to capture the Zeitgeist of the Movement in his book *The Making of a Counterculture*, extolled his readers (114) to recapture "our childish sense of the world enchanted." Instead of politicization as a means to perceptive self-consciousness and human emancipation he appealed to an increasing "adolescentation."

Paul Goodman was among the first strong voices to say that the problems of growing up in American society derived from the nature of society rather than the deviance of young people. "I assume," Goodman (1960 xvi) wrote, "that the young really need a more worthwhile world in order to grow up in at all." In *Growing Up Absurd* he described how the system "thwarted and insulted" the natural qualities of youth. In his later thinking on the subject Goodman added to the traditional romantic view of childhood as innocence or noble savagery the argument that helping to preserve what is best in the natural wildness of children involves adults as children; that is, it calls upon adults to reach for residues of their own childhood from which they may have only reluctantly "come down" into maturity. Goodman commended (1977 143) the retrospective creation of adults who have sought to become like unto children, who can "draw upon child powers without inhibition." As long as the adult could recover the mental set of the child as appropriate for themselves, Goodman felt, that they could understand the profound reality of their condition.

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TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE SEX IN CRITICAL  
THEORY: SEXUALITY IN THE EARLY WRITINGS  
OF WILHELM REICH AND ERICH FROMM

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*This paper explores the relationship between society and sexuality, which is overlooked in the later phases of Critical Theory. The author begins with a discussion of the role of sexuality in the writings of Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm. Reich uniformly celebrates and strategically deploys sexuality to critique Western capitalistic society while Fromm lacks a clear and consistent utilization of sexuality. Reich uses Marx in his predominately Freudian framework of sexual repression in trying to address the problem of repression and suppression in Western capitalism. Fromm, on the other hand puts Freud into his already Marxist approach to authority, the family, and ideology. Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer largely ignored sexuality in their later writings, but instead used Freudian concepts in their theory of the authoritarian personality.*

Despite the much celebrated dismissal of Marxism, associated with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the continued alteration of Freudianism, an inexorable conundrum lingers; namely, what does sexuality have to do with subjectivity and the sociopolitical conditions, familial organization, and economic relations which produce it? Quite frequently though, traditional scholars and more innovative intellectuals, like Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan, have overlooked, displaced, and even sublimated this question, opting instead to isolate sexuality, society, class, and consciousness within discretely situated and hermetically sealed fields of inquiry. In contrast with the current, general avoidance of the puzzling fit between erotic, psychic, and socioeconomic domains, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, numerous thinkers, including Otto Fenichel, Reuben Osborn, and Henri de Man, struggled to ascertain the precise, material relations existent among sexuality, society, and subjectivity through the integration of Freudianism and Marxism.

But perhaps, the most memorable formulations, conjoining dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis, were presented by advocates of Critical Theory, especially Erich Fromm, and by the iconoclast, Wilhelm Reich. Since Reich and Fromm read Marx and Freud differently, they produced divergent conceptual schemata for understanding society, subjectivity, and sexuality. In spite of these differences, the psychoanalytical social theories of Fromm and Reich shared much in common. The early writings of Fromm and Reich clearly exemplify